

**Memories
of
Center Store,
McCook County,
South Dakota
1930-1940**

**Merland Howe
(2005)**

Table of Contents

ii	Table of Contents
iii-iv	Center Store, McCook County, South Dakota
1	Sundays in Center, S.D.
2	Neighbors at Center, S.D.
3	Peggy, the Center Store Dog
4	S.D. Haircuts
5	Playing Cowboys and Indians
6-7	Uncle John Howe at Center, S.D.
8	Plowing at Center, S.D.
9	Fenn's Ice Cream, South Dakota
10	Norris, the Traveling Salesman
11	Fight Nights on the Radio
12	S.D. Pheasant Hunting
13	Punchboards at the Center Store
14	S.D. Gypsies
15	S.D. Bootlegging
16	Hitchin' Post at the Center Store
17	Electric Air Compressor at the Center Store
18	Grandpa Anderson's Model "T" Ford
19	Solar Power in the 1930s at Center, S.D.
20	Livestock at Center, S.D.
21	S.D. Canning
22	Leaning Model "T" Ford
23	S.D. Dirty Thirties (Great Depression)
24	1934 South Dakota Blizzard
25	Pushing a Car at the Center Store
26	Trying Tobacco in 1930s South Dakota
27	S.D. Graveling
28	Road Building During the Depression in South Dakota
29	S.D. Branding Time
30	Dominos at the Center Store
31	Conclusion
32	Name Index

Center Store, McCook County, South Dakota

Nineteen-thirty must have been a very good year. First, it was the year of my birth in a South Dakota farmhouse seven miles north of Salem and three miles east. January 6th was the date, and I joined my mother, Mayme; my dad, Ben; and two brothers, Laurel who was then eight and Lyle, who was six. We were not on this farm-place more than a few months after my birth before making the one-mile move west to the community of Center.

Center was a very rural community consisting of the store (more about this later); a Lutheran Church; a schoolhouse; homes of a trucker; re a carpenter; a parsonage for the minister of the church; and three farmsteads that were all within a radius of about one-fourth of a mile from the store. If you branched out to a two mile radius, there must have been another dozen or two farmsteads around.

In the twenties, there had been a Center Store, but in 1928, it burned to the ground and was not rebuilt by its owner. This made a big gap in the community and so Ben and Mayme decided to get into the country store business. Six miles east of Center stood a wooden frame building known as the Ramsey Hall. It was a community hall that held meetings and occasional dances for the neighbors in that area. The Ramsey Hall was for sale and my folks purchased the building and had it moved west to Center. They had purchased one acre of ground on the southwest corner of the intersection just west of the church and north of the school. t This became the new Center Store.

I don't know its exact dimensions but I believe the building was about 28 feet wide and perhaps 44 feet long. It was partitioned in half so the front 28 × 22 became the store and the remaining part was turned into living quarters. The building was quite high in the middle so a second floor area was put in over just the living area. A small sunporch was added on the north side of the livingroom. This, plus a small kitchen & pantry, a dining room and one bedroom made up the main floor. Upstairs was more of a loft area with two bedrooms and a large open area used for storage. There also was a basement under the living quarters. It was accessed by a stairway that could be entered either from the kitchen or from the store.

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(Center Store, continued)

Later years brought an addition of approx. 12×16 to the south side of the store and was used as storage and a cream and egg station. There was another shed, or small barn located near the south edge of the acre that had multiple uses. At various times it held a cow, some chickens, a car and whatever else needed some shelter.

One other building that had several different locations on the acre was the outhouse. It always seemed to be located far away from the house in the winter when you had to go to it in the bitter cold, and too close to the house in the summer when your sense of smell could guide you to its current location.

A cistern had been dug beside the living quarters and it provided our water. Rain gutters along the large roof kept the cistern in water most of the time, but I believe water had to be hauled in from time to time during some of the prolonged dry spells.

A large coal furnace stood in one corner of the store and there was a room heater in the dining room that provided heat for the living quarters. A round kerosene burner heater was used in the upstairs area and had little effect on keeping things warm. There was a bottle-gas cook stove in the small kitchen, and in the basement there stood a large cast-iron cookstove that Mother used for boiling water for washing clothes. She also used it to do a large amount of canning for our family. We always had a garden that provided a substantial amount of our food at Center.

So, 1930 saw the birth of both the Center Store and myself, and we sort of grew up together. At least until 1940 when we moved into the town of Salem where my dad started his career in county politics being elected the McCook county Auditor. The store was then rented out to a succession of tenants and was finally sold. But those first ten years of my life at Center holds a lot of memories. I will attempt to briefly tell about some of those memories, in no particular order, on the following pages and hope you will find them interesting.

Sundays in Center, S.D.

Sundays, at noon, as soon as church was over, Dad and Mom would hurry to the store to open up for customers. There were always a few people that needed fuel for their automobile, or some grocery items, and it was usually a very busy half-hour or so before everyone was on their way. Sometimes, during hunting season, the store would stay open most of the afternoon.

It seems like most Sundays were never spent at home alone. Invariably, if not arranged sometime beforehand, someone would invite our family over for dinner, or Mom would invite some people to our place for dinner. Mostly, these dinners were spur-of-the-moment things and there was always plenty chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy and fresh garden vegetables. Home-made bread usually was always part of the menu, and no one left the table hungry.

Then, after dinner, the old folks would sit around and talk while the kids played outside. Later in the afternoon, everyone would have to head for home to do the chores, which were always a seven-days a week schedule.

Also, one Sunday a month was always Swedish Sunday. The entire church service was conducted in Swedish, including renderings by the Swede Choir. I think by the mid 1930s or so, these Swede Sundays were phased out because so many of the young people didn't speak or understand the language. The Swede Choir did continue for quite a number of years and performed occasionally at special events like Midsummer Picnic, or a funeral for one of the pioneers of the Center community. After our pastor Nels Lindau retired, none of his successors could speak Swedish fluently enough to conduct services in that language.

Neighbors at Center, S.D.

Within less than a quarter mile of the store were four neighbors who did more than their share in helping raise me. All were within easy walking distance and I probably made a pest of myself with my frequent visits.

Directly across the road east was Elmer and Elsie Larson. Elmer did trucking and at home he had a wonderful shop where he made all sorts of things out of wood. One item I recall him making for me was a wooden wheelbarrow, just my size, and which he had painted a bright green. I wish I still had it, but I probably wore it out pushing it around the yard. Elsie had a beautiful garden with lots of flowers, which she tended almost daily. I would wander over and see what she was doing. Most times she would invite me in for a cookie or a piece of cake, which she always had on hand.

Immediately east of Larson's was O. G. Gustafson's. He was the local building contractor and Mrs. Gustafson tended to her chickens and kept house. She would call the store and order a few groceries and ask if I could deliver them up the hill with my Radio Flyer wagon. I was always more than glad to do so, because she usually had a big slice of chocolate cake for me as a tip. Sometimes, when she didn't have cake on hand I would get a nickel or a few pennies for my services.

West of the store lived Ernest and Linnea Carlson. They too usually had a treat for me when I came visiting. No wonder I was kind of chubby with all the neighbors treats.

North of Center was where Henry and Louise Pearson lived. Their son, Eldon, was a year or two younger than I, but we did play together quite a bit. I probably instigated some of our playing ventures that brought on reprimands from our parents. Mischief was easy to get into and hard to get out of.

Peggy, the Center Store Dog

Peggy was a mutt, mostly rat-terrier, that spent most of her time in the store, greeting customers and getting handouts. She was an accomplished beggar that could con certain customers out of a treat whenever they came in. One who spoiled Peggy the most was O.G. Gustafson, the carpenter who lived just east of the store and south of the church.

O.G. would come in the store and buy a small sack of chocolate candy and then tease Peggy before sharing with her. He had a heavy Swedish accent and would say "Pedgie, ya vant a shoclade?" and then made her dance in circles to earn her treat. Peggy knew whenever he came in the store she would get some chocolates so she would jump around and dance in expectation of her coming treat.

Peggy also liked peanuts, in the shell, which she would chew up and spit out the shells. Peanuts in the shell came into the store in large burlap bags that held perhaps 50 pounds of peanuts. On one occasion I remember my mother blaming me for a pile of peanut shells in a corner behind the heating stove in the dining room. I denied having anything to do with this mess, and I don't think I was believed for sometime.

What finally vindicated me was when Peggy was seen by Dad getting into the peanut sack and with four or five whole peanuts in her mouth, headed to her warm spot behind the stove. Proceeding to shell and eat the peanuts, the pile of shucks grew, and the blame was lifted from my young shoulders.

After that incident, the peanut sack was kept tightly closed, and Peggy had to beg for an occasional peanut instead of pilfering them on her own.

S.D. Haircuts

Ernest and Lennia Carlson lived in the first place west of the store and on the north side of the road. Ernest was a man of many talents. Besides farming, he also did carpentry work and also was equipped to do barbering. His shears were the squeeze type to keep the cutter bar going back and forth. His scissors were the pointed ones with the extra finger-lever to make them easier to keep snipping and the black tapered barbers comb completed his tool chest.

Whenever I was in need of a haircut, Mom would give me a dime to put safely in my pocket and send me off to see Ernest. It was a walk of a couple blocks to their place, and I looked forward to getting my haircut because Linnea always had some cookies or a piece of cake for me when I was finished. Ernest had a tin can about 12 inches in diameter and probably 7 or 8 inches tall that used to contain marshmallows. This tin was placed on a chair and I would climb up and sit on top of it. Then a barbers cloth, made from an old flour sack, was pinned around my neck and Ernest went to work.

The hand-powered clippers had a tendency to pull and that part was only endured because of the treat I would get later. When finished I would fish through my pocket and find the dime and give it to Ernest. Then I would have my cookies or cake and trudge on home all trimmed and looking neat for another few weeks.

I think Ernest also cut the hair of both my brothers, but I don't remember if they got by for a dime a cut or what. They probably didn't get cake and cookies like I did.

Playing Cowboys and Indians

The Teske house stood vacant. It was about a quarter-mile south of the store, and on the west side of the road. Otto Teske and family had moved out and the place seemed deserted. It looked like an excellent place to play.

I was probably seven at the time of this incident, and I was playing with Eldon Pearson who lived on the first place north of Center. He was the son of Henry and Louise Pearson and at this point in time he was only five or so. We played together quite a lot and this one day we were playing cowboys and Indians. Somehow, we wandered up to the Teske place and found are way into the house which was quite empty.

The house had a second floor in it and it made a first-class fort from which to fend off those pesky Indians that were circling the house. We both had shiny metal capguns and in order to shoot better, we calmly used the butt of our six-shooters to bust out a window or two This made it much easier to drive off those pesky Indians, but we had made one bad error in judgment.

Driving by on the road at this time was another neighbor, John T. Anderson. He happened to look over toward the house and saw the broken windows and the two Indian-fighters and our shiny six-shooters and he knew what had transpired. He felt compelled to pass this information on to my parents and Eldon's parents and frontier justice was swift and painful. Restitution was made by our parents and Eldon and I never ever played at the Teske farm again.

I do believe I must have been the instigator of the whole thing because I was a year or so older than Eldon and the more-experienced Indian Fighter. I hope he forgave me for getting him into so much trouble.

Uncle John Howe, Center, S.D.

Uncle John, Dad's brother, stayed with us at Center most of the time while I was growing up. Uncle John was a carpenter, plasterer, bricklayer who worked for most of the neighbors for many miles around. His specialty was plastering and his reputation for honesty and the quality of his work were known far and wide.

A couple instances stand out in my mind relating to Uncle John. One was when I was around six, I would try to build things to play with out of wooden crates and whatever I could scavenge that appeared useful. I would usually ask if I could use one of his hammers, or a pliers, or whatever tool I might need for the project at hand. Because of my young age, I never would get permission to use his hand-saws, but whatever I needed sawed, he would help out and cut it for me.

This one particular instance, I was working at my latest project in a quite corner of the store, by the furnace and the folks and Uncle John were having a cup of coffee around the dining room table. I needed a small board cut, and not wanting to disturb anyone, I decided to try the saw myself. The hard part of sawing was getting the saw started into the wood. Kneeling on one end of the board, on a small bench, I steady the board with my left hand and with the right hand holding the saw I prepared to draw the teeth into the wood to get my cut started.

The saw chattered on the wood, slipped and came down on my left thumb just as I was making an imposing effort to commence sawing. The blade ripped through my thumb nail and went clear to the bone all the way to the first joint. I foolishly thought I could keep it a secret from the adults, knowing I had done wrong, so I grasped my left thumb tightly with my right hand and ran to the upstairs bedroom where I began crying with pain.

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(Uncle John Howe, continued)

My parents knew something had happened and ran up the stairs to see what was wrong. By this time I was bleeding profusely and crying with pain and worrying about what punishment I had coming for using Uncle John's saw.

First aid was rendered and my poor thumb had to be bandaged for many days, but I lived through it and still carry a heavy scar on my left thumb, a continuing reminder of using Uncle John's tools without permission.

Another incident I'll always remember about Uncle John occurred one winter day when I must have been about five. I had gotten a new sled for either Christmas or my birthday, and I was playing with it in the front yard. There was a slight ditch just north of the property that had a coat of ice over an area perhaps thirty feet long and two or three feet wide. I was pulling my sled around on the ice when Uncle John came by and wanted to show me the art of holding the sled while running and then doing a belly-flop onto the sled. The momentum from your approach run would propel you across the ice for quite a distance. Only this time there were extenuating circumstances Uncle John had not figured on. The problem was the ice. While thick enough to support me and my sled, it was not thick enough to support Uncle John doing a belly-flopper with my sled under him. The thin ice shattered, and the water underneath was only five or six inches deep. This caused Uncle John to sail along through water, slush and shattered ice for several yards. The thin slivers of ice at his face level left their mark. He had many cuts on his face and it took some time in the kitchen in front of the mirror using a styptic pencil to go over his scratches and cuts to stop the bleeding.

Plowing at Center, S.D.

Immediately north of the store was a farm field that belonged to Ernest Carlson. One day, the field was being plowed with an old John Deere tractor equipped with steel lug wheels. Connie Skoglund, who must have been about 20 or so, was operating the tractor for Ernest.

Being a pesky and curious four-year old, I climbed through the fence to get a better look as the plowing progressed. Connie stopped the tractor and I asked if I could ride along for a few rounds. Permission was granted and I stood behind Connie, on the drawbar, and hung on tightly to the iron seat.

After a couple trips up and down the field Connie decided it was time for me to get off. He was about to disengage the clutch with the long lever that did this, when the tractor hit a rock and lurched, throwing me off my perch behind Connie. I fell to the ground behind the tractor and just ahead of the plow. The plow wheel was just touching my neck when Connie got the clutch lever disengaged and stopped the tractor.

Thoroughly frightened and crying loudly, Connie picked me up and carried me back to the store. I think Connie was as shook up as I, and once again I learned a lesson. There were no more dangerous hitch-hikes on the back of tractors for me. Besides, there were so many other things to keep me in mischief, that I didn't need tractors.

Fenn's Ice Cream

Along side the candy case and up against the east window at the front of the store stood a metal-covered ice cream cabinet. It had six or eight compartments, each with a heavy, round insulated lid to keep its contents frozen. Ice cream was hand-packed into pint and quart containers and there were usually three or four flavors on hand at all times. Ice cream cones were also sold in single and double dips along with ice cream bars.

Fenn Brothers, out of Sioux Falls, supplied the ice cream. It always came in metal cans, lined with a heavy paper, and each can probably held about five gallons of ice cream. When a can got empty, there was always a little ice cream that stuck to the paper. This part of the ice cream always tasted the best to me and I tried to always be nearby when it was time to change the containers.

Another product that Fenn's put out was the Red Bird ice cream bars. Most of them were vanilla ice cream covered with a chocolate coating. But in every box of 48 there were a few bars that had pink ice cream instead of vanilla. If you got a pink bar, it entitled you to a free one. So whenever I was given permission to get one out of the freezer, I would try to peek in the ends of the wrappers in an attempt to detect any hint of pink that would entitle me to a free one later. This was not a very successful tactic, but it was fun trying.

Fenns also made some delicious candy bars that are no longer available. Bars such as Walnut Crush; Nougat Bar; Butter Brickle; Zero Bar; and Smooth Sailin' were some that I remember fondly. Fenns sold their business and closed their factory in Sioux Falls sometime in the Sixties. Their motto had been "Fenns, That Good Ice Cream". Truer words were never spoken.

Norris, the Traveling Salesman

Of all the different salesmen that called at Center Store, my favorite was a gentleman named Norris. He traveled out of Sioux Falls and represented the Manchester Biscuit Company. He would make his rounds every three or four weeks, and when he arrived, I was always on my best behavior.

Norris would bring into the store a sample case about the size of a large suitcase. When the sides were opened on this large black box there were at least a dozen velvet-lined trays that opened up, accordion fashion, similar to a fishing tackle box, and on each little tray was displayed an inviting, mouthwatering cookie. There were marshmallow cookies, covered with chocolate; gingersnap cookies; oatmeal cookies with a white frosting dribbled over the top; sandwiched cookies; coconut cookies; cookies in the shape of Dutch windmills; every kind of cookie that Manchester's were making at the time.

Norris would always ask if I had been a good little boy since his last visit and I always had to assure him that I had. Then he would let me pick out one of the cookies from his display case to have as a free sample and after eating it, I would always highly recommend that Dad carry that particular kind of cookie on hand cause it would be a good seller.

Cases of cookies were delivered to the store in boxes about one foot square. The boxes were then placed in a rack display that held eight or ten boxes at a slight angle with a glass cover over each selection. I don't remember if they were sold by the pound or by the dozen, but a lot of cookies went through the store, and I had more than my share.

Other salesmen made their regular stops at Center, but Norris was certainly my favorite.

Fight Nights on the Radio

In the early thirties, radios were not common in the farmland homesteads. They were expensive, required drycell batteries that didn't last too long and were considered a luxury by the farmers that had acquired them.

At the store, dad had put in a 32-volt electric system, powered with a Delco Generator, a Wincharger tower, and a bank of large wetcell batteries to store the generated electricity. The batteries were racked on a wall in the basement and the Delco Generator was mounted on a floor stand next to the batteries. A flexible exhaust pipe was run through the foundation wall and ended up outside. This had little effect on muffling the noise of the generator, but did keep most of the fumes out of the living quarters and the store. The Wincharger was on a tower just outside the basement door and when the wind blew, which was quite often, the generator didn't have to run. One benefit of windy days in South Dakota.

Because of the 32-volt electric system we had electric conveniences long before the Rural Electrification Agency brought power to the rural community of Center. In addition to lights, a refrigerator, an ice cream cabinet, and pop cooler, the folks had purchased a radio. It occupied its place of honor atop the refrigerator that was located in the store and near the door that led to our living quarters.

One of the major attractions on radio in this time-frame were the boxing matches of Joe Louis, the Brown Bomber from Cleveland. He was a great Champion who fought often in defending his title, sometimes three and four times a year. Some of his opponents were Tommy Farr, Tony Galento, Max Baer, Max Schmelling, etc.

On fight nights, the store would get crowded with neighboring farmers that stood around the radio and listen to the blow-by-blow broadcast of the fight. It didn't hurt that the listeners usually bought a bottle of pop or an ice-cream cone, and so fight-night was considered good for business.

There were other special occasions when an important radio broadcast was scheduled ahead of time, such as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats that brought customers in to mainly listen to the radio, but nothing seemed to draw as well as the Joe Louis fights.

S.D. Pheasant Hunting

Pheasant hunting season was always an interesting time at Center. Besides having shotgun shells for sale, many hunters would stop in for a cold soda & ice cream, or the makings for a quick sandwich or two before resuming their hunt. With the store in prime pheasant territory, lots of out-of-state hunters stumbled unto the store and would stop in for refreshments.

One famous name that stopped by regularly, year after year, was Bob Feller, the Cleveland Indians pitcher. He was nicknamed Rapid Robert because of his 100-mile per hour fast-ball. He hunted in the Howard – Canova – Center area every year with an uncle of his who lived in Howard. His uncle was well acquainted with the store because he drove a gasoline delivery truck and regularly delivered gasoline and petroleum products to Center.

Another visitor of note was in the store one day along with his party of other hunters, having some ice cream and pop. One of the neighboring young men, Kenneth Knudson, stopped in the store at this same time, and Kenny was wearing his baseball uniform, having just come from a game at Salem.

The one visitor said to Kenny, "I see you are a ball player. I used to play a little ball myself." "Yeah, when?" asked Kenny looking at the old hunter with doubtful eyes. "It was a few years back. Maybe you heard of me, I'm Ty Cobb." "Oh sure," Kenny replied skeptically, "and I'm Babe Ruth!"

It took some time for the Georgia Peach, as Ty Cobb was nicknamed, to convince Kenny he was who he said he was. He had to show his hunting license for final proof to the disbelieving Kenny. Hall of Famer Cobb started his career in 1904 and ended up playing 24 seasons in the American League when he retired in 1928.

Punchboards at the Center Store

The store was a popular gathering place for a few regulars that would come in after supper and engage in a few friendly games of checkers on a large homemade checkerboard. On the backside of the board was another layout game that I believe was called Spiel. It also was played with checkers. Two of the most proficient checker players were Albin Schroeder and Elmer Larson.

Dad usually had one or two punchboards available for those who felt lucky and had a few nickels or dimes to spend. Most of these boards had boxes of candy as prizes for the winning numbers and they paid-out about half of what they took in.

The one person that had the most fun on the punchboard was one of the Frericks. I think it was either Fred or Leo. At any rate, he would start on a board that had perhaps half of the numbers already punched, and would start buying a dollars worth of punches. Then one of the squares on the board would only have a few punches left, and cleaning out a square would entitle you to a box of candy. So he would clean that square and start on another that looked promising.

The final punch on the board always earned the largest prize of a five-pound box of fine candy. This was always an enticement to keep playing when the board was getting low on punches. Frerick would spend several dollars winning a bunch of candy, and then give it away to whoever was around. Especially favored was the school teacher that stayed with the folks during the school year. She was always the benefactor of his harvest from the latest punchboard.

S.D. Gypsies

Several times during the thirties, a roving caravan of Gypsies were active in the vicinity of Center. Usually, there were at least six or eight cars and pickups that formed the gypsy procession. Their vehicles were piled high with crates and boxes tied to the roofs and sides as they roamed the countryside, stopping at farms that looked vulnerable to their tactics. They would confront whoever was home at a farmstead and say they wanted to buy eggs, or chickens, or they simply wanted a drink of water from the well. When 20 or 30 gypsy men and women left their vehicles and swarmed all over the farm yard and into buildings, there was little a farm couple could do to defend their property.

The gypsy women had long colorful flowing dresses that could conceal any small items they found, like hand tools, dishes, pots and pans; any thing of value they could steal. The spokesmen made a big show of actually paying for some eggs or chickens they negotiated for, but when they left many other items of much greater value left with them. Calling the authorities had little effect. The gypsies always had purchased something from their victims and a search of all their possessions for stolen goods would take forever.

Whenever they were first spotted on one of the country roads, the telephone lines became very busy with general alarms of "Gypsies coming!" and their location mile by mile. If given enough warning, farmers closed their gates and remained out of sight until after they had passed. The band of gypsies didn't break into any property, they would just overwhelm anyplace where someone was home.

When word of their coming reached the store, the gas pump was hurriedly locked as was the shed and all the doors to the store and house. Shades were pulled over the store windows and lights turned off so everything looked closed. The gypsies would knock on the door and say loudly they came to buy gas, but after no response from within, they would move on down the road. Whichever direction they traveled was immediately relayed on the party telephone lines to warn whoever was on their route.

S.D. Bootlegging

During the prohibition era, every area had it's bootlegger to supply the booze you could not purchase legally. Salem's supplier of the outlawed beverage was a gentleman by the name of Peter V. Hanson. Pete lived in the Center area and supported his family by tending to his farm. An additional source of income, which was perhaps better than farming, was his profits from bootlegging.

When Pete's supply of whiskey was starting to get low, it was time for another run to his supplier in Canada. Pete had his automobile modified special for this purpose. Springs were stiffened to the point where, when fully loaded, no sag was apparent in the appearance of the car. Also an auxiliary fuel tank was built into the car so it would make the 500-mile run to Canada without having to stop for fuel. After loading his vehicle with booze and refueling in Canada, he would head back to his farm by Center.

He was one of the better gas customers of the store because when he fueled up before one of his runs, he would take several times as much gasoline as the average fill-up patron. And he was a cash customer which made his business more than welcome.

Pete's distribution system was always rather indirect. If somebody made a purchase of his product, they would leave their money in a designated culvert or by the third fencepost from the corner, or whatever drop-point Pete determined was safest. Then the money was picked up and the liquor left in its place without any direct contact between buyer and seller. The local law undoubtedly knew of Pete's enterprise, and maybe Pete helped out by contributing to the sheriff's re-election campaign fund.

Hitchin' Post at Center Store

It was not exactly the Old West, but all the farmers had horses and buggies and wagons. Consequently Center had to have a hitching post for the convenience of its patrons. It wasn't used every day, but sometimes three or four horses at a time were tied to the of hitchin' post, which was located just south of the store about halfway between the store and the shed. It consisted of three eight-inch diameter posts set in line and about five feet between posts. Then a two-inch pipe was mounted through holes drilled near the top of the posts to make a ten-foot long hitching rail. Besides tying up horses, it made a wonderful trapeze bar, great for hanging on, turning somersaults over, climbing on, swinging from, and falling off of.

One of the frequent users of the hitching post was an old, tobacco chewing, regular store customer named John Hanks. Hanks drove an old, black covered buggy, complete with a holder for the horse whip and wooden-spoked wheels. He was a business man of sorts that did business with most all the area farmers.

Tied to the back of his buggy was a magnificent stud horse. Hanks' business was to bring this stud to the farm places to service the mares, so most of the colts born in the area were all related. He guaranteed his service and occasionally had to make a second trip to visit some of the neighbors. At any rate, he was seen quite often traveling down the road tending to his business. His stops at Center replenished his tobacco supply, and probably a few grocery items too.

With more of the farmers using tractors all the time, and having cars for transportation, the hitchin' post's use was diminishing rapidly. It did remain for many years, though, and was a sentimental reminder of the good old days.

Electric Air Compressor

The old hand-operated tire pump was a necessary item carried in nearly everyone's automobile in the early thirties. Tires had a habit of losing air and needed pumping up whenever they were noticeably low. This was a somewhat difficult chore, especially if two or three tires all needed additional air at the same time.

With electricity available at the store, it was a logical step to put in an electric-powered air compressor to help take care of the customers needs. It was much easier keeping your tires properly pressurized with a trip to Center than struggling with the manual pump. Word spread around the community of the air compressor being available and several neighbors came in to try this new convenience on their car tires.

There was an old German gentlemen who lived north of the store. His name was August Shultz and he spoke with a very heavy accent. He drove his Model T Ford to the store one afternoon and came rushing into the store.

"Ach, Ben," he said in his broad accent, "Ben! I shust heard about it. I vant chu to come blowst upen mein rrubbers." This interpreted to mean he wanted Dad to put air in his tires. August thought the compressor was wonderful and came back regularly to have his "rubbers blowst upen".

Grandpa Anderson's Model "T" Ford

One Sunday, my Aunt Hilma and Grandpa Anderson had journeyed the six miles from their place in the Ramsey Valley to Center. They had driven my Grandpa's trusty Model T Ford, which he customarily drove down the center of the road or on the left side, whichever looked the smoothest. On occasion he was known to turn around and back up a steep hill, because the clutch facing would grab better in reverse and not slip as they would often do going forward. This was his preferred way to negotiate some of the Ramsey hills rather than burning up his forward gears.

This particular Sunday also happened to be Halloween, and my brothers decided to play a joke on Grandpa. They sneaked out of the house and quietly pushed Grandpa's "T" down through the side yard and into some trees at the west edge of our acre.

When it was getting dark, Grandpa decided it was time to head for home. He went out to get his car started and came back in all excited that he had been robbed! The car was gone! Everyone was pretty upset that such a thing could happen at Center.

After some discussion about calling the sheriff to report this theft, a smirk or two from the instigators of the crime blew their cover. The car was found, in the trees, none the worse for being missing. I don't think Grandpa thought it was a very clever Halloween prank, but it was talked about for many years to come. There probably were some words said to the perpetrators that were meant to properly chastise them, but most likely had little lingering effect. It was probably good that we children didn't understand Swedish.

Solar Power in the 1930s at Center, S.D.

Clothes drying was always solar powered at Center. And many times in the winter the clothes were freeze-dried also. But another interesting use of Solar Power was rigged up primarily by my brothers.

A thirty-gallon oil drum was commandeered from the shed and the top was carefully removed. On the west side of the shed, a platform was nailed to the outside siding just large enough to hold the oil drum. This platform was mounted about ten feet above the ground and carefully braced to hold the weight of the barrel when filled with water.

A rubber hose was placed into the barrel and run through a knothole in the siding, then stopped about five feet off the floor of the shed. The barrel was filled with water a pailful at a time. A pail of water was pumped from the cistern, then carried the 60 feet or so to the back of the shed. Then it was carried up a ladder and dumped into the barrel. This took about 15 or so pails of water to completely fill the barrel.

It took a couple days with the sun shining on the barrel to thoroughly warm the water and by then the shower was ready to use. Sucking on the hose got the siphon action running and a clamp on the hose could slow the flow or completely stop it as required. This was used several times, but the work of filling the barrel made it questionable as to its worth.

Baths were usually taken in a large washtub, around the dining room stove in the winter, and in the basement in the summer. But the experiment with the Solar Powered Shower was a memorable experience.

Livestock at Center, S.D.

East of Center and across from the church was a pasture of several acres. The folks kept a milk cow to keep us in milk and cream. A daily chore was to lead the cow from the pasture and down the two blocks of road to our barn.

Dad or one of my brothers had the milking chores and in the morning the cow had to be put back in the pasture for the day. I was too small to get the cow by myself but usually tagged along for something to do. I don't remember our having a milk cow the last few years at Center but we did for a while.

Besides the cow, we had some chickens. I don't think we had very many, but they did give us some eggs and some chickens to eat. I helped gather eggs when I was old enough to get them from the nest without the hens pecking me to tears. Some of them were very protective of their eggs and took exception to losing them.

S.D. Canning

During canning season, Mom would make several trips to Sioux Falls to personally pick out the peaches, pears, apricots, cherries, etc., at the Nash Finch wholesale house on North Phillips Avenue. To make the trip from Center to Sioux Falls and back consumed the better part of a day. The back seat of the old Chevy was removed completely to make room for as many crates of fruit as could be crowded in. The passenger seat in front was one that folded up forward to make additional room for cargo.

Sometimes I would get to ride along on these buying trips. At the warehouse, Mom would inspect nearly every crate of fruit making sure the quality was right and at a degree of ripeness to ensure sales to the housewives of the community. The wood crates were pried open, looked over carefully, then nailed shut and packed into the car in every space available. On the way home I would have to sit on whatever space was still available on the folded up seat. On some trips we would get a sandwich at the dime store before heading back to Center.

Arriving back at the store, the produce was carefully unloaded and all the crates were stacked neatly in the middle of the store. Then Mom would call some of the customers who were waiting for the fruit to arrive and the supply was sold quite rapidly. Word spread over the party-line telephone and when the fruit was about gone, another trip to Nash Finch was planned.

When most of the neighbors were done with their canning and there was still a few crates left over, Mom would fire up the cookstove in the basement, and can whatever was available. Nothing went to waste along these lines, and the basement storage shelves were always full of home-canned fruits and vegetables. Whenever I was sent to the basement to bring up a jar of sauce, I would always pick my favorite, cherries.

Leaning Model “T” Ford

When the Model T came chugging down the Center road, leaning over on the passenger side by about 30 degrees, you knew immediately who was coming. Phil Jacobson; his extremely obese wife; and sometimes their son, Roly, who always had to ride on the trunk, were arriving.

This was the time for everyone to spring into action. Two sturdy chairs were brought from the dining room and placed side by side next to the grocery counter. Time permitting, any basket of grapes or crate of any kind of fruit was hurriedly put behind the counter. When finally eased out of the leaning “T”, Mrs. Jacobson would wobble her way into the store and plop her five-hundred plus pounds onto the two chairs set out for her.

While giving her grocery order to Mom or Dad, she would nibble away at whatever was on the counter. If the grapes were not on the counter, she would ask to see them and to duck their freshness and, would take a large cluster or two to sample before ordering. The same procedure held out on hamburger. The large tray that held perhaps twenty pounds of bulk ground beef was brought from the refrigerator and placed on the counter to measure out the amount she wanted to purchase. All during the weighing process Mrs. Phil would be sampling the raw hamburger, a handful at a time. Bulk candy was handled the same way. The peppermint chocolates had to be sampled for freshness before buying a sackful.

Usually on her trips to the store, she would want to make a telephone call. The phone was in the dining room, so two more chairs were lined up in front of the wall phone. She would sit down and have someone ring the phone for her. With the receiver to her ear, she ended up about three or four feet from the mouthpiece, and had to shout from her seated position for the called party to hear her. On another occasion, she had to go to the hospital with and apparent appendicitis attack, but the doctors wouldn't operate on her because of her extreme weight.

When her shopping was done and they were loading the Model T for the return trip home, Phil would have to get behind her and, putting his shoulder to her behind, had all he could do to wedge her back on board. Down the road they would go, while leaning ominously toward the ditch.

S.D. Dirty Thirties (Great Depression)

The name “dirty thirties” was proper and fitting for what the weather was like during the drought. Dust storms would arise with regularity. Sometimes there would be so much dust in the air that it would block out the sun and make it necessary to turn on lights in the middle of the day.

Dust blew and drifted like black snow, covering fence lines entirely so you could walk right over the fences. Thistle tumbleweeds blew up against them and the wind and dust would rapidly drift and completely obliterate the fences. In order to keep the blowing dust out of our living quarters, Mom would soak towels in water, roll them up, and place them on the window ledges and the cracks where the windows overlapped. This helped to keep some of the dust out, but it was an endless task to keep our home dustfree.

When rains did come, the water from the down-spouts from the roof gutters had to be diverted until they ran clear before directing the water to replenish the cisterns. If the first rainwater ran into the cistern, it would be full of dirty muddy water. The rain storms were very welcome to help ease the drought, but this also brought tornadoes to the region.

I remember one storm that took all the shingles off the south side of the large roof on the store and house. We had gone to the basement for shelter when the storm hit and I remember being wrapped in a quilt while Mom held me. We went to the basement many times because of storms, but the roof was the only time I remember major damage.

Many of the farms had building damage during some of these storms. Barns and outbuildings were destroyed on several of the community farmsteads. One of the most memorable damaged buildings that I remember was the destruction at the Mission Covenant church two miles west and one mile south of Center. The large steeple was ripped from the structure and ended up inside the roofless sanctuary. Dad had driven over to see the damage as soon as word was received of the destruction, and I got to go along. The church was rebuilt, only this time without the high pointed steeple, and still stands there, steeple-less, on the prairie.

1934 S.D. Blizzards

Winter would bring blizzards on occasion that would paralyze the entire community for weeks at a time. One of the most severe storms that I remember was in 1934 when drifts piled up fifteen feet high in places and bobsled and horses were about the only way for people to get around. In order to take care of their animals, many farmers had to tunnel through the drifts to reach their barns. One farmer (I believe his name was August Schultz) was found in his yard froze to death. Many animals also died in these winter storms.

When the big storm ended, the county highway department sent out equipment to get the roads open. On the road near the church was a hard-packed drift about ten feet deep and probably fifty feet long that was exceptionally hard to break through. The county's large 4-wheel drive truck with a six-foot high vee-plow on the front worked at busting through this huge drift. The truck would back up several feet, take a run at the drift, and with luck might penetrate a foot or two at a time, bucking the snow to the sides. The crew worked at this one drift for several hours when the truck, on one of its shattering lunges at the nearly impenetrable wall of snow, snapped a drive-line

Many hours of shoveling were required to gain enough room for them to repair the unit and several days passed before they finally conquered the drifts with a one-way trail through the deepest areas.

I remember one winter storm when we had been to my Aunt Hilma's residence in the Ramsey valley, 6 miles east of Center. We headed for home in a mild blizzard that got worse and worse, and about two miles east of Center we were hopelessly stuck. We were in sight of Gust T. Larson's farmhouse and that is where our family ended up spending the night. Larsons were also snowbound at someone else's home and it was late the next day that we got a ride in a horse-drawn bobsled back to the store. I believe it was two days after the storm before Dad got the car shoveled out and back to Center. It was nice no one locked their houses back then so we could find shelter.

Pushing a Car to the Center Store Gas Pump

The gas pump at the store was located by the northeast corner of the store building. It was the type that required you to hand-pump ten gallons up into the large glass cylinder and then it was dispensed by gravity through the hose when the nozzle was squeezed. Five gallons for a dollar was common and on special it was six gallons for a dollar.

The ground by the pump slanted down to the north. I suppose I was four or so and I would give the cars a little push from behind when they pulled away from the pump. I'm sure I was warned not to do this, but I thought I was being a big help getting these cars on their way. Ralph Klingberg had gassed up and when he came out of the store and got in his car, I got behind to give it the usual send-off.

Ralph didn't see that I was helping and as the car started to roll ahead, I started to push. The problem was Ralph had it in reverse and was going to back up to the air hose located at the south end of the building. I fell down directly behind the left rear wheel and the car backed over both my legs before my screaming brought him to a stop. Nothing was broken but I did have some bruised and skinned up legs for a while. Thank goodness cars were smaller and lighter in the early thirties, and it was another lesson I learned the hard way.

I think Ralph was as shook up as I was, thinking about what could have happened. I had to find other ways to "help out" without getting into such dangerous predicaments.

Trying Tobacco in 1930s S.D.

Two early encounters with the evils of tobacco occurred when I was around seven years old. Many of the farmers in the area chewed tobacco rather than smoking, perhaps for the convenience of biting off a chew rather than rolling their own. Factory-made cigarettes were relatively more expensive so a chew of tobacco was the economical vice of choice.

My oldest brother, Laurel, had somewhere acquired a plug of tobacco, which he tried occasionally when he thought the folks wouldn't find out. I think he decided to play a trick on me, or perhaps was getting even with me for something or the other, anyhow, he cut off a small chunk of tobacco and gave it to me to chew. I think the brand was called Spark Plug, which was a good seller at the store. I chewed for a little while, and after trying to spit like the big boys did, I accidentally swallowed. The whole chew went down my throat and immediately I started feeling somewhat woozy.

Drinking water didn't help. In fact I think it added to the problem. As I was becoming sicker by the minute, I went to Mom for comfort and consolation. The truth came out as to what had transpired and I believe that was the last time I tried to chew. I'm not sure what reprimand or punishment Laurel got at the time – I was too sick to care.

My other encounter involved only myself and I could not lay the blame on anyone else. I had pilfered a cigarette from the store showcase that contained candy, cigarettes, tobacco and chewing gum. A few wooden farmers matches from the container by the cookstove, and I was off to find a place to relax with a smoke.

The outhouse seemed like an out-of-sight good place to try out this form of kicking-back, and so, after the second match, I got the thing lit. A few puffs later there was a harsh knock on the door, which I had carefully latched, and Dad's voice demanding to be let in right now. He had evidently seen my peculiar behavior and guessed exactly what I was up to.

Not knowing what to do with the cigarette, (I hadn't thought of dropping it down the hole), I carefully laid it on the seat, opened the door and ran for the house. Needless to say swift frontier justice followed.

S.D. Graveling

A project that seemed to have no end was graveling the parking area in front of the store. The source for this material was a small gravel pit one mile west of Center. Most of the labor involved was performed by my brothers, Laurel and Lyle. Dad had acquired an old chain-drive flat-bed truck with ten-inch sideboards to use in hauling the gravel.

If I remember right, after school hours and Saturdays the old truck was cranked up and began the slow trip to the pit. I think its top speed wasn't over twenty miles per hour and I got to ride along some of the time. It took some time to maneuver around in the gravel pit to get to the better gravel. The pit had been worked rather haphazardly in the past and its floor had lots of hills and valleys. After situating the truck by the better gravel, the loading process began. This was accomplished all by hand a shovelful at a time.

The truck could not be heaped up with gravel because it would never make it out of the pit if fully loaded. A short steep grade had to be negotiated to get up on the road and it was hard to get much of a run for it. The chain drive to the rear wheels broke with regularity and repair links, pliers and wire were kept in its tool box to keep it going. It sometimes would snap a link even on the road going back to the store.

The load also had to be unloaded by hand and scattered where needed around the store front. Early spring when the frost left the ground was a busy graveling time as well as in the summer when the boys were available to do the manual labor. Being only five or six or so, I spent most of my time just playing at road building.

Road Building During the Depression in S.D.

During the Depression of the thirties, President Franklin Roosevelt started the WPA program whereby citizens could work on various public works projects to earn a few dollars for food. One of the programs in place was roadbuilding wherein the farmers in the area could help grade and gravel the county roads. If they had a team and wagon, they got extra pay and so fifteen or twenty men would work together in a crew. Gravel was loaded by hand from the pit, then hauled to the road where it was unloaded by hand and spread on the highway. Needless to say, this was a slow process, but it did supply much-needed employment.

In moving dirt for shaping the road, an elevating grader was employed. Pulled by a large crawler tractor, it would shave off dirt from the ditch area and by means of a conveyor belt would deposit the dirt in the middle of the road. Several passes up and down both sides of the road were required to get the grade built up. It still followed the up and down of the terrain, but did make a roadbed with ditches on either side.

One weekend the equipment was left parked in the schoolyard south of the store and it made an attractive place to play "roadbuilder". The elevating grader had a large handwheel that the operators would use to raise and lower the conveyor as needed. It was locked in its raised position by a footpedal that was only released when the men had a firm hold on the wheel to raise or lower the conveyor. Releasing the footpedal was accomplished by stepping firmly on it to disengage a ratchet device.

While on the machine, playing with everything, I succeeded in releasing the footpedal. The conveyor started to slowly descend, picking up speed as it fell, and the handwheel was spinning at an ever-increasing rate of acceleration. The conveyor finally crashed to the ground, cracking the main wooden pulley over which the belt traveled. This was my clue to get off the machinery and stay away the rest of the weekend.

When the workers returned on Monday, it didn't take too long to figure out what had happened. I think they felt lucky no one was under the conveyor and fortunate I hadn't tried to grab the handwheel to stop it. It would probably have broken my arms or worse. It took them most of the day to repair things, but after that, the conveyor was always lowered at night.

S.D. Branding Time

In 1936 Dad purchased a new Chevy sedan. It was black, like most all cars were at that time, and loaded with a defroster fan mounted atop the dashboard, a radio, and even an ash tray and a cigar lighter.

The latter item was what got me into trouble. I liked to sit in the car and pretend I was driving it, making all the motor sounds and shifting sounds as I did my imaginary touring around the highways and byways of South Dakota. Vroooming up and down the mythical backroads, I stopped to enjoy a pretend cigar, being that there was such a conveniently located ash tray and lighter mounted right there on the dashboard.

I couldn't play with the radio, because that had been expressly prohibited by my father in no uncertain terms. It would run the battery down and it was a no-no. However, nothing had been said about the cigar lighter so I decided to see how it worked. I had seen Dad use it. All you had to do was hold the lighter in for a reasonable length of time, then remove it to reveal a red-hot glowing circle of fine wires, which when placed up to a cigarette, would light it. A wonderful accessory to the Chevy.

I decided to try my hand at operating the lighter and carefully pushed in on the knob and held it there for a few seconds. After what seemed like enough time for it to be fully operational, I removed the lighter from its socket. To my dismay, it was not glowing red like it should have. I had not held it in long enough to reach the cherry-red stage. At the time I did not know this and to see if it was even luke-warm I pressed it hard against my left thumb. Such pain I had not felt in a long time and I began sobbing in agony. Dad heard me and immediately came to see what happened. My thumb was neatly branded with brown concentric circles in the exact pattern of the still warm lighter. Not hot enough to glow but plenty hot for branding.

I carried my brand for several weeks before it completely went away. And as near as I can remember, no spanking or other punishment was rendered. I guess I had suffered enough with my thumb being scorched.

Dominos at the Center Store

Every year, about six weeks before Christmas, the folks would stock a toy assortment for customers to purchase for gifts for their children. The assortment came in a box about the size of a peach crate, and was displayed on top of the counter for people to look through. There were Big Little Books, coloring books, toy cars and airplanes, tractors & wagons, toy guns, little dolls, magic slates, whistles and kazoos. Most items were priced in the ten to twenty-five cent range, and most items sold by Christmas time. I would usually end up with one or maybe two items from the box of wonders for my Christmas present.

When I was perhaps four or so, I snooped in the closet where Mom would hide gifts she had purchased in Sioux Falls or Madison. There was a beautiful red box, with a fierce dragon on the lid, that contained a small set of dominos hid away on a shelf in the closet. One day when I must have been quite bored, I had said to Mom that it sure would be fun to play with some dominos if only we had some. She could read me like a book and knew that I had been snooping in the closet. I got quite a lecture and was told that the dominos were going to be my Christmas present, but now that I knew about them she couldn't give them to me. She said she would just have to give them to Lyle instead.

I am sure they were intended for Lyle's present in the first place but she wanted me to know it didn't pay to snoop, especially just before Christmas. I don't remember what I got that year, but it was not a set of dominos with a dragon on the box. And I'm not too sure Lyle would let me play with them either, without him being there too.

Don't feel too sorry for me though. I'm sure I got more than my share of toys and playthings while we were at Center.

Conclusion

There are many other fond memories about life at Center that would fill several more pages of recollections, but I will save them for another time.

Things like the cream station; trading eggs for groceries; the annual anniversary celebrations; raising the Church and digging a basement under it; fifty-pound bags of flour and sugar carried upstairs for storage; the gangster era when Erickson's car was shot up; mail boxes at the store; baby chicks delivered by mail; swimming at the abandoned farm gravel pit; midsummer day celebrations with airplane rides, baseball games and weenie roasts; trading stay-overs with other kids; pheasant hunts and rabbit hunts that headquartered at the store; skiing and sledding behind the car; gathering asparagus from the cemetery; these are a few of the things that come to mind.

Other things too, like Christmas programs at the church; community plays with all local talent; school programs and basket socials; shopping trips to Sioux Falls; family reunions at Dell Rapids; visits to Uncle Arvid's in Canova and in Mitchell; the list goes on and on, and all bring back memories that should be put down somewhere.

Perhaps another time will bring forth some additional pages to add to these ramblings. I hope you found some things that were of interest to you. I have enjoyed putting them on the of computer, and maybe if I had to write this out in long-hand, it never would have materialized. Modern technology does help out in the effort to pass on a little bit of those dirty-thirties memories. Many changes took place in the past 70 years. Can the next 70 hold so many pleasant memories?

July 4th, 2000

Merland Howe

NAME INDEX

* ANDERSON AND HOWE FAMILIES

- Anderson, Anders Ostrom (“Grandpa Anderson”, father of Mayme Howe) . . . 18
Anderson, Arvid (“Uncle Arvid”) . . . 31
Anderson, Hilma (see Bratmoe, Hilma) . . . 13
Anderson, Mayme (see Howe, Mayme)
Bratmoe, Hilma (née Anderson, “Aunt Hilma”) . . . 13
Howe, Ben (“Dad”, co-owner of Center Store) . . .
 iii, iv, 1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 17, 20, 22, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30
Howe, John (“Uncle John”, carpenter, plasterer, bricklayer) . . . 6, 7
Howe, Laurel (brother of Merland) . . . ii, 4, 18, 19, 20, 26, 27
Howe, Lyle (brother of Merland) . . . ii, 4, 18, 19, 20, 27, 30
Howe, Mayme (née Anderson, “Mom”, co-owner of Center Store) . . .
 iii, iv, 1, 3, 5, 7, 20, 21, 22, 26, 30
Howe, Merland (author) . . .
 iii, iv, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31

* NEIGHBORS AND VISITORS

- Anderson, John T. (neighbor) . . . 5
Carlson, Ernest (farming, carpentry, barber) . . . 8
Carlson, Ernest and Linnea (farmer) . . . 2, 4
Cobb, Ty (baseball Hall of Famer) . . . 12
Erickson, Mr. (car shot up) . . . 31
Feller, Bob (baseball pitcher) . . . 12
Fenn Brothers (ice cream supplier) . . . 9
Finch, Nash (wholesale fruit) . . . 21
Frerick, Fred or Leo (punchboard players) . . . 13
Gustafson, Mrs. (wife of O.G.) . . . 2
Gustafson, O.G. (building contractor) . . . 2, 3
Hanks, Tom (stud service) . . . 16
Hanson, Peter V. (bootlegger) . . . 15
Jacobson, Phil, wife, and son Roly (over-sampling customers) . . . 22
Klingberg, Ralph (store customer) . . . 25
Knudson, Kenneth (“Kenny”, pheasant hunter, baseball) . . . 12
Larson, Elmer (trucking, carpentry, checker player) . . . 2, 13
Larson, Elsie (wife of Elmer) . . . 2
Larson, Gust T. (farmer) . . . 24
Lindau, Nels (Center Lutheran Church pastor) . . . 1
Norris, Mr. (salesman) . . . 10
Pearson, Eldon (son of Henry and Louise, Merland's friend) . . . 2, 5
Pearson, Henry and Louise (neighbors) . . . 2
Schroeder, Albin (checker player) . . . 13
Shultz, August (farmer) . . . 17, 24
Skoglund, Connie (tractor operator) . . . 8
Teske house (vacant) . . . 5